

What Does the Word Say?  
Session 31: Delegated Authority in the Church: Part II  
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to look at delegated authority in the church. Dr. Spencer, perhaps I should briefly summarize what we covered last time since we are continuing with the exact same topic?

Dr. Spencer: That would be a good idea.

Marc Roby: Alright. Last time we noted that the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 commanded people in the church to avoid things that are not, in themselves, unlawful. But, they were doing that to avoid causing weaker brothers to stumble and sin, which is completely consistent with the biblical command to love our brothers as ourselves and, in fact, is explicitly commanded in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 8:9, which we read last time, and in Romans 14:20, where Paul says “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.”<sup>1</sup> And so, we established that elders have authority to interpret and apply the Word of God to the lives of the people who are in their congregations. We also noted that Paul told Timothy to stay in Ephesus and to command those over whom he had been appointed as an elder.

Dr. Spencer: That is a good summary. And let’s begin today by giving another example having to do with Timothy. Paul wrote to instruct Timothy about how to deal with rich people in the church, who have a tendency to be arrogant because of their wealth, and in 1 Timothy 6:18 he said, “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.”

Marc Roby: Certainly wealth can be a trap; people are more tempted to trust in themselves and this world when they have no material needs.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. But, for our present purposes, the important point is that Paul tells this appointed church leader Timothy to *command* people to do things, which pre-supposes that Timothy had the God-given authority to do so.

We could give more examples as well. Paul wrote to Titus, in Titus 2:15, that he should “encourage and rebuke with all authority.” And we must again point out that Titus was not an apostle.

And this isn’t just the apostle Paul’s idea either. Peter also wrote about the authority of elders and how it is to be properly used. In 1 Peter 5:1-4 he wrote “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager

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to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”

We see two things in this passage that are relevant to our present discussion. First, Peter was writing to elders who had been appointed in the churches as Paul had commanded Titus to do in Titus 1:5 and as we see in Acts 14:23 was common practice in the New Testament church. God’s church is an orderly place and there is delegated authority for the good of the church. Second, an elder is a shepherd who is to lead those under his care.

**Marc Roby: It’s hard to imagine how you are to shepherd if you have no authority.**

Dr. Spencer: I would say it is impossible. God clearly delegates authority to elders to interpret and apply the Word of God to those who are under them. The leader is, of course, not to lord it over those under him and he is to be an example to them. But we must not limit him to just being an example and speaking in general terms from the pulpit. As the other verses we have looked at make clear, and we could cite many more as well, he has authority to speak directly into their lives individually.

**Marc Roby: That goes against the tide of our times, which emphasizes being a “servant leader”.**

Dr. Spencer: It goes against that tide because that tide is unbiblical. Now, of course, if the phrase “servant leader” were interpreted biblically, it would be fine. Christ said in Matthew 20:28 that he “did not come to be served, but to serve”, and yet he also told us in the great commission, in Matthew 28:19-20 that we are to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” So, his serving did not preclude his commanding and expecting obedience. We are also told in Philippians 2:10-11 that “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” So, Christ’s serving also did not preclude his being given all honor and glory. Therefore, if the phrase “servant leader” is interpreted biblically, it does not preclude authority and honor in any way.

**Marc Roby: But, that is not what is usually meant by that phrase in the modern church.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn’t. It is usually taken to mean that the leader has no authority whatsoever, which is unbiblical. The passage I read from 1 Peter 5 a couple of minutes ago did say that a shepherd should be “eager to serve”, and certainly in a sense a leader is a servant. He is serving the people under him by leading them for their good as God has called him to do. But that includes rebuking, correcting and training. These are the same purposes we see the Scripture itself serves in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where Paul wrote that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

We can also look at Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian church. In 1 Thessalonians 4:2 he wrote, “you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.” That is a pretty clear and bold statement about delegated authority. And, after reminding them of some of

the instructions he had given, he wrote, in Verse 8, that “he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

**Marc Roby:** Jesus Christ himself told us much the same thing in John 13:20, where he said, “I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me.” So, to receive a Word brought to you by a God-called minister of the gospel is to receive Jesus Christ himself, and the Father.

Dr. Spencer: We could continue to pile up example after example. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul wrote, “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work.” We again see that there are leaders who are “over” the people and who “admonish” them.

**Marc Roby:** It’s pretty hard to escape the clear teaching of the New Testament that God rules his church through delegated authorities. And we haven’t yet cited the most obvious verse in the New Testament. In Hebrews 13:17 we are told to “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Dr. Spencer: That is the classic verse on this subject. And, in context, this verse is clearly speaking about the authority of church leaders. I don’t know how the writer could have been any clearer than this. We are to submit to their authority, and we are to obey them. That should lay to rest any silly notions that the authority of church leaders consists in simply preaching the Word of God in a general way from the pulpit.

**Marc Roby:** It is also interesting how that passage concludes. It says that we should “Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a very interesting, and important, conclusion. The writer puts it in a negative way, that if you don’t obey it will be “of no advantage to you.” But, we can restate that in a positive way and say that if we obey our church leaders it *will* be to our advantage! Remember that a leader is to use his authority for the good of those under him. If he is doing that properly, it logically follows that obedience will bring blessing.

**Marc Roby:** But that doesn’t always mean that I will initially be in agreement with the command.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn’t mean that at all. In fact, one can reasonably argue that if I obey a command I agree with, that isn’t really obedience, it is simply agreement. Now, don’t get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with agreement, so long as we are agreeing with God’s will, but true obedience is displayed when I obey a command I do *not*, at least initially, *feel* like obeying.

**Marc Roby:** That’s a good point. And it certainly helps to remember that God will bless us if we obey.

Dr. Spencer: That does help a lot. As always, we are ultimately trusting in God. We are trusting that he can use fallible men to speak to us from his word. Of course, since Christians are continually being sanctified and changed more and more into the likeness of Christ, if we obey a

proper command even though we may initially disagree with it, we will usually find that our own attitude is changed, perhaps gradually, but nonetheless changed so that we eventually *are* in agreement with the command.

**Marc Roby: We just had a testimony in our church that provides a marvelous example of the blessing that comes from this obedience.**

Dr. Spencer: Your right. There is a relatively young couple in our church who came to faith a few years ago and, shortly after coming to faith, realized that their financial situation was not right. They were in a significant amount of debt. So, they came to the elders and asked for counsel. We don't need to go into all the details, but suffice it to say that some of the counsel was pretty difficult because their situation was severe. But, they embraced that counsel and have been greatly blessed. What appeared to be an impossible situation has been reversed, to God's great glory and *their* great peace and freedom. And their elder also testified that their obedience made his life a joy – which is precisely what is supposed to happen as we just read from Hebrews 13:17.

**Marc Roby: I think that John MacArthur did a good job of explaining the importance of that verse, Hebrews 13:17, in his commentary on the book of Hebrews. He wrote, “God mediates his earthly rule, secular and spiritual, through various men. Even pagan rulers who have no use for God are nevertheless used by Him ... But, for believers, God’s most important rule is through Spirit-controlled men. Someday God will rule all the earth through His Son, the King of kings, but in the meanwhile He rules His church through godly men. Submission to these men, therefore, is submission to God.”<sup>2</sup>**

Dr. Spencer: That is a clear statement about God's rule in his church. And MacArthur went on in that section to add that “The leaders of the church are called elders (presbyters) or overseers (bishops), the titles being interchangeable. These mature men are ordered by the Spirit of God to rule over His church on earth until Christ returns.”<sup>3</sup> So, independent of the specific title given to the leaders in the church, they are called to rule.

And MacArthur usefully goes even further. He continues, “In many churches today, the congregation rules the leaders. This sort of government is foreign to the New Testament. Church leaders are not to be tyrants, because they do not rule for themselves but for God. But the command is unqualified: **Obey your leaders, and submit to them.** It is the right of such men, under God and in meekness and humility, to determine the direction of the church, to preside over it, to teach the word in it, to reprove, rebuke, and exhort (Titus 2:15). They are to ‘shepherd the flock of God ...’. [and] Just as church leaders are to rule in love and humility, those under their leadership are to submit in love and humility.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews*, Moody Press, 1983, pg. 444

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pg 445

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg 445

Marc Roby: The idea that we should “submit in love and humility” is certainly foreign to most in the modern church.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And that is a shame because we forfeit some of the blessings that God has in store for us when we don’t come under his rule. The example I gave of the couple in our church getting out of significant debt is a clear example of the blessing that follows obedience.

Marc Roby: When we spoke about the authority of the state, we noted that the state was given the power of the sword to back it up, and when we spoke about family structure we noted that parents are given the power of the rod. What is the power given to the church?

Dr. Spencer: The most frightening of all powers, the keys to the kingdom.

Marc Roby: Which, I dare say, most modern churches would say refers only to the preaching of the gospel.

Dr. Spencer: I think you’re right about that. Now, we must agree that the preaching of the gospel is included. When we present the gospel, if someone responds in faith, he or she is saved and becomes a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. But, if he rejects the gospel, he remains in his sins and is outside the kingdom. So, the preaching of the gospel is certainly part of what is meant by the keys to the kingdom.

But, it is not all that is meant. There is also a need for discipline in the church. We don’t have time now to go into this in detail, but there are several passages that are important to take note of. In Matthew 18:15-20 we are given instructions for how to deal with professing Christians who sin against us, and the final step is for the church to get involved in adjudicating the case and, if necessary, putting someone out of fellowship.

Marc Roby: I think we are getting into a very important discussion, which we don’t have time to complete now, so perhaps this would be a good place to end for today. I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org).